
A STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT FOR THE 21st Century

By HANS BINNENDIJK

The international system is entering what might be called the age of complexity. Simple bipolar or multipolar models cannot do justice to events that unfold daily. This age is characterized by several simultaneous global revolutions, including a geostrategic restructuring, an exponential growth in information technology, and a relative decline in the span of control of national governments. One way to understand better the consequences of this emerging and complex international system for U.S. defense and foreign policy is to analyze several crosscutting elements, such as the relationship among the major powers, prospects of war with a regional rogue state, likelihood that conflict in a troubled state will require American intervention, and the new burdens associated with transnational threats. Such an analysis leads to the conclusion that the Nation must be prepared for a broad array of defense missions requiring a full spectrum of military capabilities.

During the first half of this decade, the major powers have pursued harmonious relations to a degree unparalleled in the 20th century. That happy state of affairs has enhanced U.S. national security, but it may not last into the next century. China's rapidly growing economic might undermines its communist ideology and the legitimacy of its one party system, and its leadership pursues nationalism as a way to bridge the gap. Russia's effort to evolve into a market democracy suffers from transition pains that could still plunge that major power into deeper chaos, with a return to authoritarian rule a distinct possibility. Both countries consider themselves divided nations since significant numbers of their nationals live outside their existing political borders. Important U.S. interests are involved in such places as Taiwan and the Baltic states. In addition, new tensions are developing between China and Japan on the one hand, and Russia and Western Europe on the other. It is unlikely that either China or Russia will emerge in the next 10–15 years as a global peer competitor, but both could become what might be regarded as theater peer competitors—nuclear powers with the capability of challenging important U.S. interests in their respective regions.

Our best prospect for avoiding a serious deterioration in relations among the major powers is to continue to engage China and Russia diplomatically with the goal of bringing both more fully into the family of nations who live by internationally recognized norms. The United States must not make unnecessary enemies by pursuing narrowly-focused policies. We must also continue to preserve and modernize alliances with NATO and Japan. Our strategy ought to be a 21st century version of British policy in the 19th century, that is, to act as the stabilizer of relations among the major powers. Our defense planners must consider more seriously the prospect that

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the Nation may confront a theater peer early in the next century. Such a confrontation would likely be limited and on the periphery of the other power, with America's aim being to thwart that power's efforts to forcefully extend control over its neighbors.

Regional rogues such as Iraq and North Korea still present a formidable challenge to U.S. interests, but the prospect that we may need to fight two rogues almost simultaneously appears to be declining. North Korea is near collapse and its military readiness has suffered significantly as a result of floods, famine, and resource constraints. A suicidal attack on South Korea might still be initiated if Pyongyang saw external forces threatening regime survival, a situation made less likely by the nuclear framework agreement. Iraq remains militarily much weaker than prior to Desert Storm, a situation sustained by economic sanctions and international inspectors. Saddam Hussein might be tempted to seize an opportunity to recapture Kuwait if America were engaged in conflict elsewhere, but he must recognize that this time the United States would pursue the conflict until he was eliminated from power. Other regional rogues such as Iran or Libya might provoke military action but such conflicts would probably be limited. Planning our force structure based on threats from Iraq and North Korea may be less necessary in the future than it was in 1993.

For the Armed Forces, troubled states and transnational threats will probably occupy an increasing amount of their time in the future, further complicating existing OPTEMPO problems. The ethnic, tribal, and religious extremism revived by the end of the Cold War gives no indication of abating. Even if U.S. interests are limited, humanitarian motivations fueled by media and public attention are likely to encourage our participation in some of these tragedies. Certain clashes, such as a civil war in Macedonia, would profoundly affect the interests of the NATO alliance.

If problems in troubled states seem apt to continue at the current pace, transnational threats will also probably rise. They result from increasingly porous international borders and decreasing capability of governments to deal with the resulting problems. Terrorism now threatens Americans more directly than in the past, especially members of the military. But dramatic solutions may be difficult. Preemption, for instance, would probably be unilateral, based on sensitive intelligence difficult to publicize, and directed against another sovereign government. International crime still is primarily a police problem unless governments are taken over by criminal elements, as happened in Panama. Under those circumstances, it can quickly become a defense

issue. Dealing with large refugee flows has already involved the Armed Forces in northern Iraq, Haiti, Cuba, Bosnia, and Rwanda. More of these situations should be expected.

This brief survey of the emerging international security environment reveals that the threats which we will face during the next decade will probably be broad in scope. They may include high end threats from a theater peer competitor as well as low end threats from troubled states and transnational crises. They will not be limited to major regional conflicts. They will require a wide range of military options, including forward deployment to provide stability among major powers, credible littoral warfare capabilities to deal with a theater peer, power projection and maneuverable land forces to defeat a rogue state, and forces specifically trained for peace and special operations. Our continued dominance in long-range lift, logistics, intelligence, and C⁴ will also remain crucial. Staying interoperable with allies and potential coalition partners will be more challenging.

The principal concept for dealing with this complexity is agility. The Armed Forces must be able to adjust to situations quickly using novel solutions when necessary. That will also require a high degree of organizational flexibility. But agility does not mean that each element of the force should be designed to perform all missions. In fact, an even higher degree of specialization may be required in some cases to give our military the necessary overall degree of agility. For example, at the high end, some units will have to be reconfigured in order to implement more fully some of the concepts inherent in the revolution in military affairs. At the low end, some forces will be required to provide a greater on-call capability to perform peace operations.

Finally, early in the 21st century the Armed Forces will benefit from the reforms in DOD organization already in place. The broader array of missions we can expect will rely on joint operations. Agility will require the kind of authority which is vested in the Chairmen by Goldwater-Nichols. And greater sensitivity to regional security issues has already been improved by strengthening the role of warfighting CINCs. In short, with some modifications, the U.S. military will be well positioned to meet the challenges of the next century. The only real threat to America's ability to perform this range of missions is the prospect of budgetary cuts that could diminish those crucial capabilities. **JFQ**

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